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Real spies don't hold press conferences

By Stephen Hunter

It was a scene to break an old espionage novelist's heart.

There was Vitaly Yurchenko, former KGB superstar, at, of all places, the Soviet Embassy in Washington, yakking out his peculiar tale of being mugged, drugged and de-bugged by the Central Intelligence Agency for cameramen and reporters of all ilk and stripe. He was acting, for all the world and to the tips of his ludicrous guardsman's moustache, like a guest on Merv.

It only proved what has become increasingly obvious over the past few years: that besides the silenced High-Standard 22, the Minox palm camera, the SAMOS satellite and the miniaturized microphone, there is a new weapon in the inventory of the intelligence trade: the press conference.

Doesn't anybody read le Carre anymore? Whatever happened to spies that kept their lips buttoned?

Spying was once the pursuit of enigmatic chaps from the old schools who did unspeakable things to each other but had the good graces never to speak of them, at least within three decades' of the acts themselves, and then only to *Reader's Digest*. In fact, that was the point: The nasty tricks these lads played on each other took their meaning from their lack of public acknowledgement.

Mr. Hunter, film critic for *The Sun*, has written four spy novels; the latest is "Target."

Kim Philby never scheduled a "photo opportunity."

We plant one of ours with them; they find out about it, but rather than separating his head from his body in flamboyant ways, they make a pet of him by feeding him worthless information, but never quite worthless enough for us to stop trusting him; except that we never trusted him in the first place, and so we've always suspected his information is worthless. Now it's our turn to use him to funnel equally worthless information to them.

So if you could freeze any single moment in the espionage history of the century for dissection, you'd uncover what might be called a latticework of bogus information, a dense traffic in semi-de-mi-half-but-never-quite-whole truths and zero degrees of trust coursing by sub rosa methods between the capitals of the world. To try and make sense of any of this was challenging: It was like playing three-dimensional chess with hand grenades against the invisible man in a burning barn. Only the steady of nerve and the rigorous of mind need apply. One historian of this baroque world called it a wilderness of mirrors.

And it was the very insularity and ambiguity of this world that made it so attractive to novelists, particularly the Brit-

ishers from Graham Greene on down to the great le Carre and his lesser but quite good acolytes, Gerald Seymour and the American Charles McCarry. It was a secret, sealed-off world whose traditions and ironies reflected the world above it, but to an exaggerated extent, like a fun-house mirror; it was a bizarre version of the modern world in which we all shunted to and fro, a world whose principles were familiar but whose byways were very dangerous indeed. For many years, our only real entry into the psychology of the spy was via the spy novelist.

The archetypal personality in reality must have been Kim Philby, who could spy for the Russians for four decades, frozen in the adolescent enthusiasms that had caused him to embrace Marxism in 1933; here was a man with a secret as big as the Ritz, who daily betrayed his closest friends and yet who never ever acknowledged a moment of guilt, a second of hesitation. His memoir, "My Secret War," consists of throat clearings, blurred intimations and anecdotes of the safely dead — an autobiographer who would prefer not to mention himself is an odd bird, indeed.

The only spy you could really connect with came from fiction. The best of these was le Carre's wonderful George Smiley, the greatest literary spy of all time.

Now Smiley was truly a gentleman, the exemplar of the patrician code of silence. An almost neurotically private man, Smiley has the true insider's

deep-seated need not to talk. He stands, in his way, for all that is the best about the Establishment — the British in particular but any establishment in general. He seeks out truth, but refuses to employ it flamboyantly, or for the self. He understands that authority is a more precious principle than justice, but that doesn't mean he has given up on justice.

But the Smiley-Philby tradition of upper-class discretion is as dead as Dracula today; if it persists in spy fiction (and it does), the reason is primarily nostalgic. It is refreshing to look back on the deadened, hushed world and feel so safe from the tyranny of the Now.

Primarily, it seems to me, two forces have conspired to drag the spies out of the dark alleyways and dusty corridors and fabled back streets of Europe and place them in the limelight.

The first of these is the mediatization of the world. It is almost impossible for anything to happen anywhere without, in very short order, legions of electronic journalists arriving to record its residue and prowl its wreckage, chatting glibly with survivors. Were Kim Philby to defect today, NBC News would be scouring the streets of Moscow for

a glimpse of, and perhaps a chat with, the old gent. Of course espionage services are aware of this, and have used it to their advantage.

For the professionals, the media, particularly the Western media, offer a potential to embarrass the target unparalleled in history. If indeed the Yurchenko "defection" was, as many now suspect, rigged from the start, it was an espionage coup planned with a sublimely realistic idea of how the Western media operate, what qualifies as a big story, how they will turn the slightest glimpse of institutional failure into a three-ring circus. It's as if the KGB had hired a media consultant; they now know that going public can do far more harm to the enemy than staying private.

Of course it isn't just the KGB that plays the game of espionage through public relations, better known as creative leaking; indeed, it may have been the CIA's own eagerness to score a media coup for the Western intelligence community after revelations of the Walker and West German penetrations last fall that made it vulnerable to the KGB ploy. And recently, for whatever reason, elements in the intelligence community leaked word of a CIA ploy to undermine the Kadafi regime to the Washington Post.

The second force, perhaps more difficult to document, is something very much in the air. That is, as Christopher Lasch tagged it, the culture of narcissism, the rampant urgency to place the self above all else, to detract maximum gratification from every moment.

This toxin, released perhaps by that mad genius Andy Warhol when he cursed the century with his wish that everybody could be famous for 15 minutes, subverts all institutions exactly as it diminishes all accomplishments. We see those humble servants of literature, editors, demanding their own lines from their publishers; it's no longer a Simon and Schuster book, it's a Richard Seaver book or a Donald L. Fine book. We see the most mediocre directors demanding and getting their names above the title (Orson Welles, John Huston and Akira Kurosawa never had their names above the title). As this works out in the espionage trade, the spies no longer derive their pleasures from getting away with it rather than by talking about it. One of the pleasures of defecting is having your book excerpted in *Time* and going on the talk-show circuit.

It throws up the hideous spectre of a Kim Philby showing up, these long years past, on "Nightline." Or, God forbid, "The Johnny Carson Show."